

# **Does the Transnational Nature of Capital Require a Transnational Response?**

*A Case Study of Women Maquiladora Workers Organizing in Mexico's Northern Border Region<sup>1</sup>*

Cindy L. Doucet

Doctoral Candidate, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa

E-mail: [cdouc017@uottawa.ca](mailto:cdouc017@uottawa.ca)

Draft Paper Prepared for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference  
Canadian Political Science Association  
Montreal, QC, June 1-3, 2010

---

The U.S.-Mexico border has been termed globalization's ground zero (Williams 1999: 139). This is where "[o]n both sides of the border, residents understand globalization not as a theory, but as a result of living the experience" (Landau 2005: 358). For over four decades, tens of millions of Mexicans have moved from the impoverished countryside to the overcrowded cities along Mexico's northern border to work in the maquiladoras, in an industrial revolution reminiscent of a Charles Dickens tale set in ugly, industrial landscapes of poor country folk forced to move to the cities for jobs, and in the process lose their tradition-bound rural communities which are replaced with the fend-for-yourself mentality of urban living (Landau 2005). This is where the workers who assemble auto parts, electronic equipment and clothing for the world's largest transnational corporations in modern factories known as maquiladoras then travel home on old school buses to houses built of plywood and corrugated metal in the outskirts of the city. As Williams explains

Foreign managers who relocate to the border often complain that it is charmless. They locate operations there, however, because the Mexican side of the border offers what parent corporations want: close proximity to the largest consumer market in the world as well as minimal tariffs upon entry to it. On the northern border of Mexico, investors enjoy a solid infrastructure, favourable tax policies, a business-friendly political climate, and relatively lax regulatory regimes. Most important, there is cheap and plentiful labor (1999: 139).

The CFO (Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s – *Border Committee of Women Workers*) is an organization of maquiladora workers from Mexico's northern border region caught in the middle of the contradictions inherent in globalization: maquiladoras are often seen as the very symbol of the export-processing zones and international division of labour brought on by the globalization of production and producing some its negative effects such as the exploitation of workers and environmental degradation. Against the power of transnational corporations (TNCs), the very symbol of the globalization forces of the economy and of production has emerged a response from civil society trying to counter this "globalization from above" with a "globalization from below". Fernandez-Kelly who has written extensively on Mexico's maquiladora industry gives us an explanation of the relationship between export-oriented industrialization and globalization. She illustrates how the maquiladora industry in Mexico is an exemplar of economic integration on a world scale: Globalization is used to describe

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. Information on the Centre is available on the web at [www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca).

subprocesses such as faster communication on a global scale, diffusion of cultural norms and values across borders and escalating trade among nations in disparate regions. However, there is a deeper underlying event to these phenomena: the reconfiguration of production, more specifically manufacturing, at the national and international levels. “In 1975, maquiladoras trailed only tourism and oil production as generators of revenue. By the 1980s, they constituted the world’s most successful experiment in export-oriented industrialization. In retrospect, they may also be seen as the natural antecedent of the North American Free Trade Agreement implemented almost twenty years later – a burgeoning attempt at radical liberalization entailing the suppression of government regulation” (2007: 11).

Conway and Heynen explain that globalization’s contradictory nature leads to very different analyses of its particular virtues, strengths and weaknesses<sup>2</sup>: First, we have the *hyperglobalizers*<sup>3</sup> who view globalization as the beginning of a new era, either of a much more efficient borderless economy or an unwelcome triumph of supranational global capital. Second, we have the *skeptics*<sup>4</sup> who, as the term implies, view globalization as a myth, that the world is still fundamentally the same and often point out geographical differences and the continuation of social inequalities as tangible evidence of that globalization has not changed much in the world. Third, *transformationalists*<sup>5</sup> view globalization as an unprecedented force causing rapid restructuring at the social, economic and political levels. It is diminishing the power of the state while reconfiguring national/civil power in an ever increasingly inter-connected world. This school of thought seeks to situate globalization in socio-historical context and argue that any explanation of globalization needs to take into consideration the complex and ever changing interrelationships between economic, technological, political and socio-cultural causal factors. They believe that given enough political will, the current configuration of globalization can be re-charted. Finally, Conway and Heynen add to Held et al.’s categorization of globalization’s different schools of thought with the *global geographers*<sup>6</sup>, who theorize about the geographical consequences of globalization as well as the time-space interconnections. They have also brought attention to the fact that globalization’s impacts vary significantly by geographic region. The uneven diffusion of global technological advances privileges and deprives simultaneously and divides the world geographically into “haves” and “have-nots”. Globalization’s contradictory impacts are felt at many different geographical scales (2006: 3-16). These two last views of globalization are the most useful to explaining the complex interrelationships between globalization and grassroots mobilizing which affect an organization such as the CFO. *Transformationalists* and *global geographers* view globalization from below as a response to globalization from above, and in varying degrees believe in the reconfiguration possibilities that can be brought on by civil society, especially transnational networks and concerted actions.

Coburn summarizes what many other authors explain elsewhere that one of the contradictions of globalization which leads to an alternative movement or “globalization from below” such as the transnationalization of social movements is not simply due to technological advances which were developed in conjunction with economic liberalization and which allow easier communication

---

<sup>2</sup> This categorization by Conway and Heyden of the different schools of thought to explain globalization’s contradictory nature was first inspired by Held et al. (1999).

<sup>3</sup> See Ohmae (1995) and Greider (1997) for examples of both versions of *hyperglobalizers*.

<sup>4</sup> See Hirst and Thompson (1999) for an example of *skeptics*.

<sup>5</sup> See Giddens (2003) and Rosenau (1997) for examples of *transformationalists*.

<sup>6</sup> See Peck (2002) and Swyngedouw (1997) for examples of *global geographers*.

(internet, cheaper flights, etc.). Rather, many social movements are rising specifically *as a response* to the globalization of markets and the capital as well as arbitration bodies like the WTO's perceived increase in power (2003). Kidder adds to this by arguing that it is precisely because of the transnational nature of capital that the response from labour must also be transnational (2002).

This paper proposes to add to this growing literature on the responses to globalization by asking if the answer must necessarily be found at the transnational level. Kidder is not the only one who argues that since capital is transnational, the response must also be transnational. In fact, transnational responses to globalization have become fetishized, seen as the only logical answer. This however is not what my case study shows. I argue that focusing too much on the transnational in fact makes the organization lose their reason for being: the local people they want to help. My case study of one specific organization of maquiladora workers in Mexico's northern border region, the Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (Border Committee of Women Workers) demonstrates this dilemma. While vying for ever dwindling funds from international donors, the organization focuses on which objectives will get them the most international attention and therefore the most likely to obtain funds. They no longer listen to the voice of their members who are asking for help on issues which might not be popular.

### ***Methodology***

This study was conducted by a combination of secondary source analysis of all the existing archives on the CFO held at the American Friends and Service Committee (AFSC) offices in Philadelphia, PA (August 2005), as well as field investigations in the Mexican cities where the CFO is currently the most active, Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña, in the northern central state of Coahuila (November 2006) and in the cities where the CFO originated, Matamoros and Reynosa (and nearby Rio Bravo), in the northern eastern state of Tamaulipas (September to November 2007). This field work included conducting approximately 50 semi-direct interviews with current and ex-members of the CFO and participatory observation. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. However, no names or identifiers were used anywhere and all participants were promised confidentiality and anonymity. This is essential since organizing workers in Mexico's northern border region is dangerous and many of the workers can and do lose their jobs for talking about the working conditions in the maquiladoras or trying to organize workers. Understandably, trust issues needed to be overcome. Other obstacles included CFO employees sitting in on many of the interviews in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña which resulted in limited amounts of information concerning the internal struggles of the CFO during these interviews. Participating in the CFO activities and social outings, living with some of the members and conversing with all of the members in Spanish did however lead to some of the more cautious members opening up to me. This also led to confidential and anonymous interviews with current and ex-members of the CFO, interviews which proved to be a much richer source of information. This information concerning the democratic challenges within the CFO was further enriched by interviews with one of the founders of the CFO as well as members of the CFO who left to start their own organizations<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup>Due to the nature of the information obtained, which is sometimes critical of the CFO itself, ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees is crucial. Therefore, the following designations will be used throughout:

**LTM (Long-time member):** Anyone who has been a member of the CFO for more than 10 years and has an in-depth knowledge of the organisation or who is a current or ex-employee, volunteer or executive council member and has acquired their in-depth knowledge of the organisation in this way (in which case, she or he does not necessarily

### *The CFO as an internationally renowned grassroots women's organization*

The CFO, the Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s, which is translated to the Border Committee of Women Workers or Border Committee of Workers, depending on the emphasis given, is often characterized as a community-based organization. It is also seen as an NGO that is part of a larger women's movement and workers' movement. Among academics and social activists who concentrate on Mexico-US border issues, the CFO is known as one of the first organizations of and for Mexican workers in the maquiladoras, empowering women from the ground up. These analyses represent the dual discourse of the CFO. It is a community based organization who's first and foremost priority is to help the workers who are its members. However, it is also an organization that with the help of the American Friends and Service Committee (AFSC) has developed to become a voice to the outside world of the working conditions of the maquiladora workers.

Armbruster views the CFO as an example of community-based organizing which is closely related to feminism and women's movement and adds that:

Community-based organizations symbolize a reaction to the sexist, hierarchical, and centralized decision-making processes common to many trade unions. In contrast, community-based organizations such as the CFO establish participatory democracy as their goal in which community members and workers decide their own strategies and the methods for social change (1995: 81).

Other authors who focus more on the local grassroots women's organization are for example Rosenberg, who worked as a volunteer coordinator for the AFSC qualifies the CFO as the "Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO or Border Committee of Women Workers)" (2006: xv) and specifies that "women lead it." (54). Rosenberg again underlines the importance of women within the CFO when she makes a link between the women of the Mexican Revolution and the women of the CFO whom she considers to be "in their own way, revolutionaries [...] Certainly it is easy to observe the importance of the women in the culture of the CFO and their strength and clarity as leaders" (51). She further adds "The CFO is a women-led organization. Its mission gives special importance to women's issues. Even the men are explicit about fighting for women's rights (54). Petros, who also volunteered for the AFSC, is also clear in her description of the CFO as a grassroots women's organization: "The Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (Border Committee of Women Workers or CFO) is a women-led grassroots organization that operates in five cities along the Mexico-U.S. border, namely, Ciudad Juarez, Ciudad Acuña, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa" (2007: 4). Huesca, in his in-depth fieldwork study of the CFO daily organizing activities, a study that spanned from 1997 to 2002, describes the CFO as "grassroots, labor organizing effort known as the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) or Border Committee of Working Women." (2003). Finally, in their article on women organizers in the maquiladoras of Nicaragua and Mexico, Bandy and Bickham Mendez add the CFO in their explanation of the struggle women organizers in community based organizations go through to have their perspectives and gendered critiques heard:

In labor support and community organizations such as the *Comité Fronterizo de Obreras* (CFO) and the *Comité de Apoyo Fronterizo Obrera Regional* (CAFOR),

---

need to have participated in the CFO for more than 10 years).

**NM (new member):** Anyone who identifies herself or himself as a member of the CFO, has been participating for 10 years or less and has never worked or volunteered for the organisation.

\*\*\*All of the quotes from CFO members' interviews have been translated from Spanish by the author.

women are more than half of the membership, and they occupy positions of great esteem and power. At the local community level, women *promotoras* have been among the most successful organizers, educating and empowering citizens with inclusive social movement agendas for economic justice (2003: 177).

Domínguez however sees the “Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) (Border Committee of Women Workers)” as an NGO that is part of a larger women’s movement and one that has found alternative ways to help workers claim their rights, through the use of transnational networking. These include the birth of the CFO, which resulted from a transnational solidarity with the American Friends Service Committee (2002: 227). Hertel also refers to the CFO as a transnational women’s organization when she uses the feminine *Comité Fronterizo de Obreras* (Border Committee of Women Workers) and reports of their assistance to Human Rights Watch investigators in their research on forced pregnancy testing in the maquiladoras (2003: 165 citing Human Rights Watch 1996). Other examples of academic acknowledgment of the CFO as a transnational women’s organization include Frederickson, who places the CFO in her section on Feminist Cooperation when speaking of women’s activism in the Global South and the important role being played by young women entering the maquiladoras:

Today, transnational feminist organizations include the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, Women on the Border, the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), the Colectiva Feminista Binacional and La Mujer Obrera, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), the Comité Fronterizo de Obreros (CFO)-Committee of Women Workers, as well as groups as long established as the YWCA and the LWV, both of which have global initiatives that target women and build leadership skills through education and exchange programs (2007: 65-66).

Finally Kohout, who did a two month internship with the CFO, sees it as neither a movement that is exclusively a women’s movement nor a labour movement. He explains that while the CFO adopts some Marxist ideals, it does challenge some of the class reductionist politics of unions and looks at classic feminist issues such as “inequality in the workplace, the violation of women’s human and reproductive rights, domestic violence and workers’ health issues” (1999: 3) in the development of its strategies. Kohout argues that while the CFO is a movement that originated in the households and communities of the private sphere, it also uses the private space of the home “to facilitate discussion about the public space”(1999: 1-2). Although acknowledging their transnational links, Kohout argues that their “top priority is not to foster cross-border relations, rather it is to consolidate and expand its operations along the border and other maquiladora cities to the interior” (1999: 4).

#### **Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, de Obreros or de Obrer@s:**

Although the consensus in the academia seems to be that the CFO is an internationally renowned women’s organization, the CFO itself seems to waver on this. The question is does the acronym CFO stand for the Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s, the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras or the Comité Fronterizo de Obreros? Which is the correct term? It depends on who you ask and when you asked the question. For many years, the documentation from the AFSC and the CFO itself referred to the CFO as the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras. When they registered officially as a

non-profit organization in 1998, they used the name Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s, the @ symbol to signify both the a (feminine) and the o (masculine) versions of worker. However, since this @ symbol gets lost in the translation, we can look to the official English version to uncover whether or not they consider themselves a women's organization or not. For many years, the answer would have been yes, at least when it came to their public image at the international level. The @ symbol was used to appease some of the men in the organization who insisted on an organizational name that would also include them. There is no consensus among the members of the CFO as to what the organization is called, Comité Fronterizo de Obreras or Comité Fronterizo de Obreros. Some did not even know the actual name. The men in the organization, when using the long form of the CFO, call it the Comité Fronterizo de Obreros while the women more often than not still call it the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras. Since none of the members can read English, they have no idea how the CFO is advertised to the outside world. This is mostly handled by the AFSC, who also handles the translations on the CFO website and the English grant proposals.

Most of the men in the CFO felt that the @ symbol was appropriate because it was more inclusive, since it was not only a women's organization after all. Some LTMs felt that the CFO never diverted from its original mandate which is to help women workers. They did agree that the independence of the CFO in 1998 is the marking point of when there started to be more men in the organization. One LTM in particular differed from the standard opinion and felt that yes, the decision to go from Comité Fronterizo de Obreras to Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s represented a change in the objectives and strategies of the CFO:

- *Well, yes [...] Well, it's like I told you, the participation of more men, well equal numbers of men and women [...] In the past when there were more women participating, they gave workshops on family planning [...] They talked almost only about that at the beginning but then they were looking for, well they weren't workshops but more like talks, they were giving more talks [...] or when there was a meeting and there were more women, well we had to talk about the article 176 [of the Mexican Labour Law] which talks about pregnancy, that it was more for women [...] how things could affect one as a woman*

This LTM felt that there were significant changes over time in the CFO and that now, there are no longer any workshops for women only. The reasons for this are quite interesting as they include a perception of amelioration for women's conditions both in the union, where there seems to now be an equal participation of men and women and also regarding the issue of family planning which seemed to have been more of a taboo subject in the past but is now discussed openly in locations like workers health centers. One could imply that the CFO felt they could move on to issues that were commonly shared between men and women because the issues that primarily affected women had either been resolved or the services were available elsewhere and the women maquiladora workers no longer needed the CFO's help with these particular issues. These responses do help to shed some light as to why the CFO used to be considered more of a women's organization and why the decision was made to use a more gender-neutral symbol to represent a more inclusive membership. Many factors seemed to have influenced this decision: the possibility for women to obtain family planning information elsewhere, the growing number of men in the maquiladoras and consequently of men wanting to learn more about their rights as workers and finally, the insistence by men in the organization to change the name of the

organization to one that also included them. Or perhaps it is as Kohout explains it: one of the objectives behind getting men to participate in the CFO is to “strip them of their machismo” and to help them view women as their equal partners and to no longer feel threatened or emasculated by women’s roles in the workplace (1999: 4).

Domínguez and Quintero explain that the CFO or Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, according to an interview with their leader, Julia Quiñonez, did start off as a women’s movement. The inclusion of men is explained by the fact that the percentage of women workers in the maquiladoras has been diminishing. The organization seeks to increase the percentage of women participating in the male-dominated unions, in order to make them more responsible towards women’s issues. Domínguez and Quintero explain that the CFO focuses more on women’s practical demands (concrete material demands) than on strategic gender issues such as changing the public and private domain of women. “CFO, in the same way as other feminist organizations, went from a women’s support project to a more general one, in which women’s rights were contemplated as part of more general demands, which took away from their priority in the struggle. In other words, in CFO’s struggle - and its defence of women – the priority was placed on other identities such as worker, spouse or mother, relegating their condition as women to the background” (2007).

### ***The CFO: Official discourse versus day-to-day reality***

As we will see throughout this paper, there is an idealized notion that views the CFO as a grassroots organization that is espousing direct democratic principles while at the same time playing a key role on a transnational scale. This is an image that is cultivated by the CFO. Competing for scarce resources internationally means that an organization has to project a marketable image for the large funding agencies. As Townsend, Mawdsley and Porter explain, donor-funding plays a large role in the control over the decision making process of NGOs. This limits the grassroots decision making process of NGOs. Many NGOs, the authors underline, have dependent origins and many were even created in response to a huge increase in funding opportunities which took place in the 1970s and 1980s due to Northern institutions wishing to bypass the state and fund more efficient ‘third sector’ organizations. Unsurprisingly, this led to many NGOs adopting Northern organizations goals and agendas which were in line with the dominant neoliberal vision of development of integrating the poor and marginalized into market relations. NGOs are seen as the best chance of survival for many of the world’s poor, the vast majority of NGOs are accountable to their donors and not their clients (2008). Their research supports the thesis advanced by Tvedt that “NGOs have become a donor-created and donor-led system, ‘a transmission belt of a powerful language and of Western concepts of development’, carrying resources and authority from the core to the periphery, and information and legitimization from periphery to core.” (2008: 90, citing Tvedt 1998). In many ways, the CFO does fit this description: It does have dependent origins (see below) and their public perception, their image, is of the utmost importance to the CFO who needs to cater to a larger international audience and the issues that will draw more attention in order to obtain much needed international funds while at the same time trying to accommodate the demands from the local level, the grassroots.

The CFO was created as part of the AFSC's Maquiladora Project in the late 1970s. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a religious Quaker organization based in the United States, whose objectives are to promote peace and social justice throughout the world (AFSC 2009). The AFSC first started taking an interest in the maquiladoras and the plight of the maquiladora workers in 1978 as part of their Mexico-United States Border Program (AFSC 1982). At first, the focus was on educational information about the maquiladoras, called 'runaway shops' at the time (AFSC 1978). The interest in the maquiladora workers becomes more evident in 1979, when one of the participants at their annual meeting was the anthropologist Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, a leading expert on the conditions in the maquiladoras, who spoke extensively on the Mexican Border Industrialization Program (BIP) and the effects on the workers (AFSC 1979a). This awareness of the poor working conditions for women maquiladora workers led some AFSC members to start teaching them about their rights (AFSC 1979b). Those workers who participated in the first consciousness-raising efforts went on to form the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (Tong 1999). In 1986, the CFO was established (Hernandez 2004b) and began its road to independence but still remained in large part under the tutelage of the AFSC. Finally, in 1998, the CFO became completely independent when it opened its own office in Piedras Negras, Coahuila and acquired the status of *asociación civil* (recognized non-profit organization) in Mexico (AFSC 1999a).

The CFO is now an independent organization. It does however retain close ties with the AFSC, although the AFSC specifies that both organizations are now equal partners. The AFSC states that its first objective in this alliance is "To empower the CFO leadership of women maquiladora workers, and to support the CFO in its development as an autonomous, worker-controlled organization" (2005). Aside from its alliance with the AFSC, the CFO works with other groups at the transnational level. The CFO organizes tours of the maquiladoras for their sister organization, Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin So Close to the Border, an organization which is part of the AFSC), in order to enable the workers from Austin to see for themselves the working conditions of the maquiladora employees. Other transnational examples are the work the CFO has done with Human Rights Watch in order to bring attention to issues such as forced pregnancy testing in the maquiladoras. They have also worked with American unions, and on other international campaigns such as the one to eradicate child labor (Domínguez 2002). Finally, the CFO was one of the founding members of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM) and played a key role in the CJM for many years (AFSC 1996). The AFSC partners with the CFO in certain matters, such as the publication, in 1999, of a report on the six first years of NAFTA as seen from inside the maquiladoras (CFO 1999). This report was the first developed by the maquiladora workers themselves, thus allowing an insider's view of the effects NAFTA has on the maquiladora workforce (AFSC 199b).

In its own words, the CFO is a "grassroot organization that supports union democracy and workers rights in six cities along the Mexico-U.S. border" (2009). The main objective of the CFO is to educate, organize and empower women who work in the maquiladoras in order to achieve their overriding goal, which is "to improve working conditions and the quality of life for workers in the maquiladoras, especially women and their families" (2009b). The specific objectives of the CFO include:

- to increase knowledge, self-confidence, and empowerment among maquiladora workers; to foster union democracy and advance independent unionization; to

help both female and male workers understand the impact of the maquiladoras on health, for themselves, their families, and their communities; to forge links of solidarity and strategic partnerships with like-minded organizations around the world; and to expand rank-and-file organizing to other cities with maquiladoras (2009c).

As we can see above, the self-described *raison d'être* of the CFO is the workers themselves. Ricardo Hernandez, the director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the AFSC, explains that the CFO never registers workers as being members of the CFO because by definition, the CFO is the workers themselves. He adds that the work plan of the CFO is developed in a collective manner through direct and continuous consultations of workers in different towns and each year in November approximately thirty to sixty workers get together to develop the work plan at the annual meeting (2004a). Hernandez has been the director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the AFSC since 1997 and could even be said to be the instigator of the CFO's decision to register as an autonomous non-profit Mexican civil society organization. He plays an integral part in the transnational aspects of the CFO and it can be argued that promoting the CFO at an international level would be part of his job description. In his article "Taking Flight", Hernandez defines the CFO as a grassroots organization who had been working at that time for more than 17 years with hundreds and thousands of workers: "Members of the CFO voice a constant refrain: to stick with what the workers say. As a result, demagoguery is absent, and even oratory is scarce. They're not seeking political power and don't pay much attention to elections. Their decency, and the way they make everyone feel included, win them respect" (1999: 91). Hernandez could be said to be waxing poetic when he tells us that their desire for justice, their distance from political games and their "otherworldly, almost virginal silence in public (just like angels)" (91-92) made the CFO stand apart in Mexican social movements.

The publication of *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA*, by the AFSC in 1999 certainly led to an increase in the visibility of the newly autonomous Mexican civil association, the CFO. Although the translation of the CFO varies from article to article within the publication, the sections that were written by the AFSC specifically refer to the CFO as Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, Border Committee of Women Workers. Not once is the CFO referred to as Comité Fronterizo de Obreros or Obrer@s. The public image being cultivated in this publication, which is the major source when speaking of the CFO, is clearly one of a women's organization. Of the articles in the *Maquiladora Reader* that speak directly of the CFO, Mary Tong's article "Reaching Across the Rio", originally written in 1993, gives a potent image of an organization that is able to effect important social changes through low-profile consciousness-raising methods about their rights as workers under Mexico's Labour Law. Methods that are lauded as being responsible for the fact that "For thousands of CFO members in over 100 chapters, the complacent, easily victimized workers become a relic of the past". This same article also gives many examples of cross-border initiatives such as work with the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, visits and exchanges with U.S. delegations of workers from Tennessee who then went on to testify about the ill effects of NAFTA, and worker exchanges with Guatemalan maquiladora workers and therefore portrays the CFO as an organization that truly focuses on the grassroots base while at the same time reaching out at the transnational level.

### ***Who or what is the CFO?***

For many the CFO is indistinguishable from its coordinator, Julia Quiñonez. She is in fact the face of the CFO to the rest of the world and for many of its members, Julia Quiñonez is the CFO. In media articles, she is portrayed as an expert on the working conditions in the maquiladoras, an advocate for women's rights and a fearless leader<sup>8</sup>. Julia Quiñonez plays a starring role in Hernandez' article "Taking Flight". She is compared to angels "who come down to earth and get themselves mixed up with humans" and the CFO is said to "wear their own wings of desire: the desire for justice". Hernandez calls the CFO "The Zapatistas of the Maquiladoras" and later compares Julia Quiñonez to Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista movement since neither likes to be identified as the leader of the organizations they belong to. Although both have a voice in important decisions, they are more interested in trying to interpret and serve what comes from the grassroots. [...] Among her [Julia Quiñonez'] many virtues she has cultivated a genuine modesty and an unstoppable way of doing things that place her in the ranks of those who really make a difference (1998).

When asked to define *What is the CFO?* many members state that it is an organization that helps workers, that teaches them about their rights. However, surprisingly, many more of the members did not even know what the CFO does other than the workshops that they have attended. They had no idea the CFO did anything or had any contacts at the international level; they asked me questions about the CFO during the interview because they wanted to learn more about the organization. A few did not even know what the acronym CFO meant. Some also associated the CFO with the person of Julia Quiñonez, not knowing much about the organization or what it does. They were however still interested in participating because of their friendship with Julia.

Not surprisingly, new members define the CFO in a similar fashion, with answers that mirror the official discourse they are taught by the CFO *promotores* during their initial contact and training stages. The CFO is defined by new members on the local level. They speak of what the CFO does for them and other maquiladora workers at the level of the individual worker or the maquiladora. Not one single new member spoke of the international level when defining the CFO. Most were not even aware that the CFO also operated on an international level. What was more surprising was that some long-time members associate the CFO with Julia, which does seem to pose problems with the notion of a grassroots organization which is supposedly defined by its members and not its leader, as the following excerpts from LTMs demonstrate:

- *I would say that is a place where you can get advice and get a bit of knowledge on how to defend yourself from the reprisals of a company, also of the oppressions of the union, because Julia what she does really is simply giving advice on what you should do. Always, we you look for her, she goes looking for people who work in the factories, and whenever you look for her she gives you advice and nothing else.*
- *It is an organization that helps you a lot, helps you from here, they talk to you, if you have a problem, you need to meet with them, let's go, and if you say: well, it they say it isn't certain, meet Julia and talk with Julia and you will see that your way of thinking is going to change to theirs, to their way of thinking, of the CFO, that is not an organization that comes and disturbs (or agitates) thing, that's not it, because they never*

---

<sup>8</sup> See for example Quinones (1996) and Dallas (1998).

*tell you that you are brilliant, and the other is... no! Your rights are these and your obligations are those, to say it this way. But yes, they help you a lot.*

One LTM's comments even led me to pose the following question 'For you, the CFO is Julia?' to which the LTM replied:

- *Yes. For me, yes. Since it is more with her, it is with her that I identify most.*

Another LTM was told by others that the CFO and Julia Quiñonez were one and the same. In answer to when was the first time they heard about the CFO, this LTM replied that :

- *Look, here in [one of the border cities] there are many maquiladoras and there have always been problems and when we listened to the CFO, I was already working, and some people in the maquila where I was working, that is where I heard about the CFO[...] I heard about Julia Quiñonez, of all of the people who participate in the CFO and I thought well Julia Quiñonez is Julia Quiñonez, I don't know what is the CFO and they told me: it's the same thing and I said fine if it is the same thing, let's go.*

Although not many members have been there since the beginnings of the CFO (early 1980s), many have been there for more than 10 years and sometimes closer to 20 years and they all felt that there was a strong sense of group identity before the independence of the organization in 1998 and that the status of *asociación civil* did not change how they felt about their organization. For the most part, they do not remember exactly when the CFO became an *asociación civil* or why or how Julia Quiñonez was chosen as their coordinator (a position she has held since their registering as a non-profit organization in 1998). When questioned concerning the decision making process and whether the independence led to more participatory democracy or not, many responded that they had less say in the decisions now than before the independence.

When asked how things were different from before the independence, one LTM responded:

- *Yes. I think that before Julia was different because she did not feel as independent, as free to make decisions. Before, it was the workers that made decisions. **Before, Julia never made a decision without consulting with the workers. The workers were the ones that decided** if they made a call, if they decided to go to such and such a city, if they decided to create a movement, the decision was up to the workers. When the CFO [became independent], things changed a lot. They changed a lot: **now, they do not consult the workers, they do not take them into account, the workers, now the decisions are made by only Julia and Ricardo, they no longer consult the workers...**[emphasis added]*

Another LTM echoed the feeling that the workers were no longer part of the decision making process and feels that since the independence in 1998 there have been problems. This LTM stated that in the past the workers were the CFO; however, that statement is no longer true:

- *For example, well, before it was better because we didn't have anything, no material, nothing, everything we achieved ourselves and that is one of the things that would please me, going back [to how it was previously] because **before, the CFO was more ours, the workers, and now no. Now I feel that it isn't ours. I, in fact, sometimes feel that I am not of the CFO...** Yes, sometimes I feel that I am not of the CFO. In fact, now I am not going to go to the annual meeting... I am going to miss it all and it is not, I say, because I don't want to participate, it's not that I don't desire participating there because many things have*

*happened...they ask me are you CFO or do you consider yourself CFO? Yes I consider myself CFO but they don't let us grow as CFO or decide ourselves, as workers. [emphasis added]*

When asked which form of the CFO was better, before or after independence, the same LTM offered the following explanation:

- *For me, I don't know. Now, the CFO is very internationalized and has a lot of strength internationally. But I see that the international strength, it does not have it nationally. You understand? That is the difference. When before, although there we lacked things, that there wasn't an office, that there wasn't a phone, that there wasn't a car, that there weren't many things, there were more people. More people and more solid, **the CFO was stronger before and I think there was more diffusion (more known) at the local level than now that it is more structured.** [emphasis added]*

This is a common theme, a feeling of disenfranchisement among many long-time members of the CFO who feel they no longer have a say and who are unable or unwilling to challenge the leader, Julia Quiñonez. Some stay and remain unhappy with the direction the organization is taking but do not feel they have the power or the right to question the decisions. Others simply leave. They still like the ideal of the CFO; it is the reality of where the organization is at that is the problem. Since there is no process in place to change the leader and the annual meetings, the largest gathering of members and when the major decisions should be made, are mostly attended by new members, this seems unlikely to change in the near future.

### **Loss of the grassroots base**

As we have seen, grassroots decision making is a major part of the CFO's official discourse (CFO 2009a; CFO 1998) and of its partners. Unfortunately, it is not a precise portrayal of the current conditions and internal struggles within the CFO. This grassroots power seems to only exist on paper and in the official discourse. On the ground observation of the CFO annual meeting in Ciudad Acuña from November 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006 revealed quite a different story which seriously questions the description of the CFO as a worker organization in which the decisions were made by the workers, the grassroots base of the organization. For example, during the annual meeting in November 2006 and prior to the annual meeting, Ricardo Hernandez, the director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the AFSC, was very involved in the decision making process. Julia Quiñonez, the coordinator for the CFO, explained that the *promotores* (grassroots organizers) in the city where the annual meeting was taking place were incapable of undertaking the task of organizing an annual meeting and that she, Julia, needed Ricardo's help to organize the meeting and that is why was present for 2 weeks prior to the meeting (Quiñonez 2006b). The annual meeting ended up being more of a workshop with experts and union leaders from the US teaching workers about their rights than a meeting of the grassroots base. It was difficult to determine who the intended audience was, since it was on the one hand a presentation of all that the CFO has accomplished since its beginnings for the international audience which included the president of the United Steel Workers (USW) union from the United States, Jim Robinson. On the other hand, since most of the members present at the annual meeting were new members, it was also a presentation aimed at giving them an overview of the CFO and also the future project that it hoped to establish with the USW. The majority of the weekend meeting was spent in presentations from Americans to the Mexican workers. Over two-thirds of the members present had been participating in the CFO for less than

a year. Of those who had been members for a longer time period, most were *promotores* (employees of the CFO) and therefore obligated to participate in the annual meeting. Furthermore, on the day when the decisions should have been made, Monday, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006, most of the members had returned to work and there were very few people actually present - less than half than on the previous days. Therefore, no decisions were made at the 2006 annual meeting. Later conversations with Julia Quiñonez revealed that this was not common practice and that the decisions would be made in each city individually. However, one long time member revealed that the previous annual meeting had been very similar in content and decision making process, with only 4 or 5 long-time members present. The rest were new to the CFO.

One LTM stated that past annual meetings were very different, that the members felt a sense of unity and each city presented a report about what had been accomplished. Another LTM, explained that:

- *At the annual meeting, they are supposed to present a plan of the achievements, what are the goals, what is the work plan and in a certain way, yes they do do it, the workers, BUT which workers are you talking about, of which city are you talking about, or who are the workers that participate in the annual meetings ... because **it wasn't the members of the CFO that participated in this meeting, it was new people and it is always the same. It is always new people that go, a client that is only for the moment and who you will never see here again.** ... I participated in many annual meetings ... in the ones I participated in before, yes there were workers of the CFO, there were workers that were engaged with the CFO, there were workers that they themselves did the work It is very different now. [emphasis added]*

Finally, another LTM, when asked to compare the annual meetings of the CFO at the beginning, 10 years previously (around 1996) and at the last few years:

- *Yes, they changed a lot. I remember when at the beginning of the CFO when it didn't have a name yet, we had the meetings in Miguel Aleman [A border city which is approximately midway between the central region and eastern region where the CFO is located]. We were around 20 people at the most. We talked about strategies, experiences, achievements, we made future plans of how we could visit more people, how we could talk to our colleagues about work, about our rights and now... you could say that 10 years later, I was in an annual meeting in Reynosa where there was close to 40 people, we debated a lot over the union leaders, to see how we could go about developing large strategies covering a whole plant to be able to change these leaders and 10 years later...which was 4 years ago (in 2002), it was in Laredo... Well, I saw it more as, more as international, how do I say it, more projecting, more the CFO internationally and **I felt that the sense of the base (the grassroots level) was a bit lost, which was how to extend itself more locally.** [emphasis added]*

When asked if there were guests from other countries at the annual meetings in the past:

- ***There were never people from other countries in the annual meetings. It was always solely CFO because it is a meeting of the CFO.** [emphasis added]*

There is a clear feeling of discontent from the long time members, that the meetings are no longer for them, that they are no longer really an important part of the CFO. Many have expressed the feeling that the meetings are now for the new members, who are viewed, as one LTM explained, as clients that have to be won over. No matter the reason, the grassroots base is clearly disappearing from the CFO membership. Some of the long-time members are limiting their participation in the organization while others are leaving. Of those who have left due to feeling disenfranchised within the CFO, some have tried to recapture this grassroots base by starting their own organizations which follow many of the principles of the CFO. Others have joined similar organizations that also tried to help maquiladora workers learn about their rights. Both of these scenarios cause multiple problems for the CFO. Losing long-time members in their organization leads to a destabilization of the internal structure and the grassroots base. When these members leave to start their own organizations or join other organizations, this also creates even more competition for scarce resources from international donors. The CFO is at a crisis. For reasons out of their control and of their own doing, they have lost their grassroots base and the democratic principles they promote in their official discourse are not present internally. Not only is the local level of organizing affected by this, so is the transnational level which is suffering from the loss of their ability to take on large scale projects and obtain much needed sources of funding.

## Bibliography

- AFSC (2009), [About AFSC], consulted January 27.  
<http://www.afsc.org/ht/d/sp/i/267/pid/267>
- AFSC (2005), “Mexico-US Border Program Maquiladora Project”, consulted January 27th, 2005, <http://www.afsc.org/community/maquiladora.htm>
- AFSC (1999a), “Chapter Five, A Border Partnership: The CFO and the AFSC”, in Rachael Kamel and Anya Hoffman (eds.), *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA*, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1999.
- AFSC (1999b), [News Release, October 11, 1999: Report Finds Dramatic Worsening of Labor, Living Conditions for Mexican Workers Under NAFTA], consulted January 27, 2009.
- AFSC (1996), [Memo regarding History of Maquiladora Project Involvement in CJM and Recommendations for Future re: CJM], April 11.
- AFSC (1982), [Discussion Paper on Mexico-US Border Work, Summary section], October.
- AFSC (1979a), [Transcript of Mexico/U.S. Border Panel Annual Meeting], November 10th.
- AFSC (1979b), [Mexico-U.S. Border Program Update], October 9th and AFSC (1981), [Letter to National Community Funds explaining the work of the AFSC’s Mexico/U.S. Border Program’s project Obreras Maquiladoras Unidas], May 7th.
- AFSC (1978), [Draft copy of “Runaway Shops and Displacement of People – Global in Scope”, internal memorandum ], June 10.
- Ralph Armbruster (1995), “Cross-National Labor Organising Strategies”, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1995, pp. 75-89.
- Steve Babson (2000), “Cross-Border Trade with Mexico and the Prospect for Worker Solidarity: The Case of Mexico”, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 26, no. 1/2, July, pp. 13-35.
- Joe Bandy and Jennifer Bickham Mendez (2003), “A Place of Their Own? Women Organizers in the Maquilas of Nicaragua and Mexico”, *Mobilization: An International Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 173-188.
- Elaine Coburn (2003), “Interrogating Globalization: Emerging Contradictions and Conflicts”, in Yildiz Atasoy and William K. Carroll (eds.), *Global Shaping and its Alternatives*, Aurora: Garamond Press, pp. 111-136.
- CFO (2009a), [What is the CFO?], consulted January 27, 2009.  
[http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/quienes\\_somos.en.html](http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/quienes_somos.en.html)
- CFO (2009b), [What is the CFO? – Overriding Goal], consulted January 27, 2009.  
[http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/quienes\\_somos.en.html](http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/quienes_somos.en.html)
- CFO (1999), “Six years of NAFTA: A View from inside the maquiladoras”, consulted January 27, 2009 [http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/seis\\_tlc.en.html](http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/seis_tlc.en.html)
- CFO (1998), [CFO Statutes].
- Dennis Conway and Nik Heynen (2006), “Globalization’s dimensions”, in Dennis Conway and Nik Heynen (eds.), *Globalization’s Contradictions: Geographies of discipline, destruction and transformation*, New York: Routledge, pp. 3-16.
- Sandra Dallas (ed.) (1998), “Making life bearable in the Maquiladoras”, *Business Week/ Letter from Mexico*, September 21.

- Edmé Domínguez and Cirila Quintero (2007), “Mujeres trabajadoras como actores transnacionales: el caso de México frente a la integración regional”, Draft copy of paper presented at the LASA (Latin American Studies Association) conference, Montreal, September 5-7.
- Edmé Domínguez R (2002)., “Continental transnational activism and women workers’ networks within NAFTA”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 4, no. 2, August, pp. 216-239.
- Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (2007), “Nafta and Beyond: Alternative Perspectives in the Study of Global Trade and Development” *ANNALS, AAPSS*, no. 610, March, p. 11
- Mary E. Frederickson (2007), “A Place to Speak Our Minds: Locating Women’s Activism Where North Meets South”, *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 23, no. 1-2, pp. 59-70.
- Henry Frundt (2000), “Models of Cross-Border Organizing in the Maquila Industries”, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 26, no. 1/2, July, pp. 36-55.
- Anthony Giddens (2003), *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*, New York: Routledge
- W. Greider (1997), *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism*, New York: Simon & Shuster
- D. Held, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt and J. Perraton (1999), *Global Transformations*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ricardo Hernandez (2004a), Director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the American Friends Service Committee. E-mail communication dated April 22nd.
- Ricardo Hernandez (2004b), Director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the American Friends Service Committee. E-mail communication dated March 23rd.
- Ricardo Hernandez (1999), “Taking Flight”, in Rachael Kamel and Anya Hoffman (eds.), *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA*, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, pp. 91-93.
- Shareen Hertel (2003), “Una contienda acotada: la defensa transnacional de los derechos laborales de las mujeres en las maquiladoras de México”, *Región y Sociedad*, vol. XV, no. 26, pp. 153-191.
- P. Hirst and G. Thompson (1999), *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance*, 2nd ed, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Robert Huesca (2003), “Social Aspects of Labor Organizing: Maquiladora Workers in a Grassroots Development Effort”, *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 19, no. 2-3, pp. 227-267.
- Human Rights Watch (1996), *Mexico: No Guarantees, Discrimination in Mexico’s Maquiladora Sector*, New York:HRW.
- Rachael Kamel and Anya Hoffman (1999) (eds.), *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA*, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee.
- Thalia G. Kidder (2002), “Networks in Transnational Labor Organizing”, in Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 269-293.

- Michael Kohout (1999), “Challenging the Private-Public Dichotomy in Latin American Women’s Movements: An Example from Mexico”, unpublished paper presented at the 1999 General Meeting of the Canadian Association for Latin America and Caribbean Studies, Ottawa, Ontario, September 30th to October 2nd.
- Michael Kohout (1996), A Geography of Maquiladora Unions, M.A. thesis in Applied Geography, Southwest Texas State University, San Marco, Texas.
- Saul Landau (2005), “Globalization, Maquilas, NAFTA, and the State: Mexican Labor and ‘The New World Order’”, *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 21, no. 3-4, (357-368)
- K. Ohmae (1995), *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies*, New York: Free Press.
- J. A. Peck (2002), “Political Economies of Scale: Fast Policy, Interscalar Relations, and Neoliberal Workfare,” *Economic Geography*, vol. 78, no. 3, pp. 331-360
- Kristen Marie Petros (2007), *Women on the Border: Migration, Maquiladoras, and the Making of “Reynosa, Veracruz,” Mexico*, M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.
- Sam Quinones (1996), “Maquiladora Justice”, *Global Frontrunners*, Continental Airlines Magazine, August
- Julia Quiñonez (2006a), Coordinator of the CFO, Unrecorded conversation on November 17th, in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico.
- Julia Quiñonez (2006b), Coordinator of the CFO, Recorded interview on November 29th, in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico.
- Judith Rosenberg (2006), *The Rhetoric of Globalization: Can the Maquiladora Worker Speak?*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
- J.N. Rosenau (1997), *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kathleen Staudt (2002), “Transcending Nations: Cross-Border Organizing”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol.4, no.2, August, pp. 197-215.
- E. Swyngedouw (1997), “Neither Global nor Local: ‘Glocalization and the Politics of Scale’” in K .R. Cox (ed.), *Spaces of Globalization*, New York: Guilford Press, pp. 137-166.
- Mary E. Tong (1999), “Reaching Across the Rio”, in Rachael Kamel and Anya Hoffman (eds.), *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA*, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, pp. 74-78. Originally published in 1993 in *Beyond Borders* (Spring)
- Janet Townsend, Emma Mawdsley and Gina Porter (2008), “Development Hegemonies and Local Outcomes: Women and NGOs in Low-Income Countries”, in Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs (eds.), *Globalization: Theory and Practice*( 3rd edition), New York: Continuum, pp. 87-97.
- Terje Tvedt (1998), *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs and Foreign Aid*, Oxford: James Currey.
- Heather L. Williams (1999), “Mobile Capital and Transborder Labor Rights Mobilization”, *Politics & Society*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 139-166.